



MYRIAD MANIFESTATIONS OF THE CULTURAL *PERSONA* IN *MALABAR MIND*

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Abstract

A literary text possibly reflects the cultural aspects of the age in which it is produced, but over the years it is re-read, analysed and subjected to a plethora of theoretical explorations and interpretations from various points of view. The globalised era characterised by a perpetual state of flux and the emergence of 'glocal' cultures, has caused the diffusion of literary cultures. Cultural Studies as an academic discipline has largely enabled critics and readers alike, to study a text in two ways- either by locating it in the context of the sociocultural circumstances of that particular age in which it was produced or by examining its relevance in the contemporary scenario. Literary texts have always facilitated authors to become 'cultural travellers', to make crossings and create bonds, spanning different borders, cultures and languages. Most contemporary literary authors consciously don assorted *personas* to move across cultures at random, with the sole aim of enrapturing the readers' attention. Indian Writing in English [IWE] has evolved into a diverse and pluralistic body of literature over the years. Anita Nair, an acclaimed novelist and poet in the IWE literary canon, has located her debut collection of poetry *Malabar Mind* chiefly in the cultural landscape of Kerala, but also depicts sweeping cross-cultural concerns. My paper studies how the poet assumes multiple cultural *personas* in her real and imagined poetic worlds, to open doors to varied aspects of fragmented human existence.

Key words

literary culture, multiple *personas*, borders, socio-cultural themes, poetry, cultural landscape

Literature deemed to be a heightened form of linguistic composition, basically constitutes of various genres like poetry, novel, short story and drama. Literature generally displays a mixture of characteristic features and qualities that primarily identify it as a literary discourse, which can range from the imaginative to the realistic or from the fictional to the figurative in terms of the language used. It is not mandatory that all literature should endorse and satisfy the criterion of literariness in a conventional and ambiguous manner. With time there has been a change in the outlook of both authors and reader paving the way for the emergence of liberated and non-dogmatic forms of literariness which can be derived from many sources and manifested in literature using unconventional and strategic methods.

Different schools of theory have doled out plenty of plausible suggestions regarding how to read and interpret a literary text effectively. Simplistic aesthetic critiques have long since been discarded and critics are faced with the dilemma of whether to play the role of an interlocutor faithfully unravelling the author's intentions or to scrutinise the text using a

deconstructionist and postmodern lens which resolutely advocates the absence of the author and the presence of the reader entrusted with the conscientious duty of extricating the most feasible interpretation. S. H. Olsen views literature as a social practice not merely in:

the minimal sense that it involves a group of people among whom literary works are produced and read, but also in the stricter sense that it is a practice whose existence depends on a background of concepts and conventions which create the possibility of identifying literary works and provide a framework for appreciation, and on the people actually applying these concepts and conventions in their approach to literary works... A literary work must be seen as being offered to an audience by an author with the intention that it should be understood with reference to a shared background of concepts and conventions which must be employed to determine its aesthetic features. A reader must be conceived of as a person who approaches the work with a set of expectations defined in terms of these concepts and conventions. (Olsen 73-87)

Poems have always had a profound impact on the readers. The origin of the art of poetry dates back to ancient times, and the earliest literary genres were all poetic in nature. The poet is believed to be endowed with the gifted faculty of a unique medium of literary expression that comprises of communicating through living images and realistic metaphors. Caudwell remarks that:

Poetry is written by a poet. The contradiction which generates it is a special case of the contradiction that drives on society and is fought out in the real life and real consciousness of men – the contradiction between man’s desires and Nature’s necessity. Poetry springs from the contradiction between the instincts and experience of the poet. This tension drives him to build the world of illusory phantasy which yet has a definite and functional relation to the real world of which it is the blossom. (Caudwell 159)

Caudwell goes on to mention that poems are to be interpreted just like dreams on account of their inherent elusive nature. In poems “the manifest content is imagic phantasy, the latent content is affective reality” (Caudwell 211). The basic premise put forth here is that a poem usually transcends common thoughts and ideas and is elevated to occupy an untranslatable domain which makes it rather difficult for ordinary readers to comprehend and appreciate this genre.

It is an irrefutable fact that a vast majority of literary texts reflect the cultural aspects of the age in which it is produced. Culture, in a general sense, deals with the world of lived reality, spanning shared notions of beliefs, traditions, values and behaviour of a particular community. Geertz visualises culture thus; “Man is an animal suspended in a web of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those web (Geertz 5). Studies on culture have come a long way since Raymond Williams’ and Richard Hoggart’s pioneering efforts in Culture Studies in the mid-twentieth century. Cultural Studies derives its intellectual resources from a plethora of disciplines ranging from literature, psychology, sociology, mass communication, anthropology, linguistics, media studies, arts, history and technology. This academic discipline has enabled critics and readers to critique any text in the current sociocultural context. Cultural Studies enable texts to be analysed from different angles and to be subjected to a plethora of readings and re-readings giving rise to multiple critical readings and cultural interpretations. In the globalised era, characterised by a perpetual state of flux, multiple causes have contributed to the diffusion of literary culture. Literary texts have always facilitated authors to make crossings and create bonds, spanning different borders, cultures and languages. Such literary expeditions have obviously revealed a gradual cultural shift through the ages, in the natures and perceptions of societal values, customs and beliefs. Most contemporary literary authors in the global literary canon can be rightly called ‘cultural travellers’.

Indian Writing in English [IWE] has evolved into a diverse and pluralistic body of literature over the years. Anita Nair an acclaimed author included in the canon of Indian Writing in English, has dealt with a variety of socio-cultural themes in her literary oeuvre. This best-selling author, born at Mundakottakurissi near Shornur in Kerala has earned international repute through her superb skill in characterisation, intense imagination and creativity as exemplified in her novels *The Better Man* (1999), *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Mistress* (2005), *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010) and *Idris: Keeper of the Light* (2014). Her narratives are crafted with finesse and interwoven with nuggets of finely delineated events and characters. She has edited the book *Where the Rain is Born: Writings on Kerala* (2003) and translated renowned Malayalam writer Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai’s seminal work *Chemmeen* from Malayalam to English. She has also published books for children including the *Puffin Book of World Myths and Legends* (2004) and the *Puffin Book of Magical Indian Myths* (2008). Her works have been translated into over thirty languages around the world. As a woman writer, Nair has tried to convey with great insight, varying hues of feminine sensibility and psychological

states in response to rigid principles of patriarchal norms and sociocultural transitions. Nair's debut collection of poetry *Malabar Mind* first published in 2002, is located chiefly in the cultural landscape of Kerala, and also depicts sweeping cross-cultural concerns.

My paper studies how the poet as a 'cultural traveller' assumes the role of multiple cultural *personas* or selves in her real and imagined poetic worlds, to open doors to varied aspects of fragmented human existence. S. K. Sareen's epistemological analysis of Kamala Das' poem "Loud Posters" begins with a description of the poetic self.

A poet, as much as an individual, is a knowing self. The self is a constitution of layers of sensory reception of experience from the outermost physical to the innermost ideational self. The differences in response to experiences are differences of the density of different levels of experiences – some poets live and experience at the external, merely sensory levels; others live the life of the inner self – all external stimuli for them is merely the starting point for the real transformation in the self. (Sareen 119)

Persona in Latin means a mask and generally denotes an individual's social or public façade. Actors in ancient Greek theatre used masks to represent the characters they played. In psychological terms, a *persona* refers to the personality that an individual presents to others in order to be viewed as a particular kind of person. People often don different personas while playing out varied roles during different phases in their lives. Writers consciously and deliberately don various *personas* to move beyond borders and across cultures at random, with the sole aim of enrapturing the readers' attention. These various *personas* or identities or selves are portrayed by authors through different characters who fill up the illusory, fictional or realistic worlds they occupy with their internal phantasmagoria. Baraiya Surya delineates in the article "Methods of Cultural Studies: Identity, Everyday Life, Cultural Intermediaries" that "the Identity of a person is, for Cultural Studies, dependent upon the roles played by that person, the signs that designate that person and it is constituted through experience, and representation is a significant part of experience" (<http://baraiyasaryu1315.blogspot.in>).

Stuart Hall in his influential article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" has investigated the subject of cultural identity and representation. According to Hall all individuals write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. Hall adds that whatever we say is always 'in context', positioned and hence it is worth remembering that all discourse is 'placed', and the heart has its reasons. In the aforementioned article Hall outlines the following two different ways of thinking about cultural identity:

The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self, hiding inside the any other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning. (Hall 1990: 222-37)

Recent trends in Indian English poetry reveal a high degree of innovation and experimentation in language and structure. The choice of poetic themes with contemporary significance implies a gradual paradigm shift from native cultural ideologies to cross-cultural interactions. This quest for a synchronised blend of tradition and modernity constitutes a kind of watershed between the two and results in novel productions of new-fangled glocal literary matrices. K. A. Agrawal in his article "New Indian English Poetry" traces the genealogy of this genre from pre-Independent times. According to his analysis, contemporary Indian poets are less conservative and borrow extensively from western sensibility to create a new cultural consciousness with an emphasis on the need for expression of the self.

Indian English poetry is a composite awareness in the matter of race, milieu, language and religion, an awareness leading to tolerance and broad-based understanding, an integral awareness of Indian heritage, not a fragmented approach to it, a simultaneous cultivation of science and spirituality... Their poetry has deep seated ideas like political, economic, secular and spiritual. ... they share their predecessors' individual nostalgia as well as their successors' sense of crisis and quest for identity... The rapid urbanization and industrialisation of the country has focused attention on the problem of cultural identity, and on traditional values in relation to changing realities, both in our society and in our collective personality. (Agrawal 129-130)

Anita Nair has lucidly and tangibly delineated multiple cultural identities in the form of various cultural *personas* or identities, using the poetic medium to give voice to their innermost feelings and opinions and desires. In the poems included in the anthology *Malabar Mind*, the writing *persona* is depicted mainly in two different ways. First is by

employing the narrative *persona*, with which Nair basically posits the female experience vis a vis the sociocultural codes ascribed to women either confined within their domestic spheres or in their workplace ambiances or straddling the private and public realms in the current cosmopolitan milieu. Some of the cultural identities of the narrative *persona* are stereotypical women characters whereas others instead of conforming to stereotypes break away from existing ties of societal and cultural norms. The thematic terrain of the poems includes aspects of motherhood and family bonds; emotions such as love, lust and loneliness; aspirations, dreams and dilemma of women in the modern age. Strangely none of these women-oriented poems deal with the theme of friendship, a relationship that many women usually take pains to forge and maintain throughout their lives. The locales and characters span wide-ranging aspects of human existence in the contemporary world.

“The Lullaby” is a poignant poem that narrates the conflicts faced by a young mother in the present-day world. The modern mother is marvellously sketched here as restlessly rocking her baby to sleep with one hand and a glass of white wine in the other. Though she appears casual and cool as she takes occasional sips from the wine glass, in reality she seems to be inwardly torn between her conflicting womanly duties. She wisely contemplates how to handle the situation- whether to be a loving mother or to be a dutiful hostess and compliant wife catering to the wishes of the guests whom her husband has invited home for a party. Feeling completely out of place she stretches her face into a smile and mingles with her guests balancing her “sweating glass of dry consolation” and the baby. The poem ends on a bitter note with the mother silently sharing her lonely thoughts with her baby- “Neglect is a habit you need to learn young” (MM 57). The poem subverts the deep-rooted tradition of the self-sacrificing and perfect Indian mother glorified in art and literature. In striking contrast to this modern mother, Nair describes a very concerned and seemingly traditional mother in the poem, “The Eleven o’ Clock News:” which poignantly depicts the anxieties of a mother, disturbed after watching violent incidents on the television news. She ponders over the safety of her two-year old infant in a seemingly uncertain and troubled future with unending wars among nations. She sits by the bedside and watches her son as he sleeps on calmly and undisturbed with, “His ivory face untainted by fear, politics or hate” (MM 87). The distinct albeit dissimilar images of the two women in the above poems evidently emulate two different cultural facets of motherhood in the modern era. The first mother is rather unconcerned and indifferent and sees the baby more as a physical burden who denies her the fun-filled social life that she inwardly craves for. She doesn’t obviously cherish the joys and travails of motherhood which most women deem a sacrosanct privilege and one that demands firm commitment, unyielding devotion and as the ultimate sacrifice. The second mother reveals more traditional traces in temperament, as she is portrayed as more loving and caring and for whom her child is apparently her first priority in life. Nothing else seems to preoccupy her thoughts and mind. Celebrated Indian English poets like Nissim Ezekiel’s famous poem “Night of the Scorpion” faithfully portrays the much eulogised all-enduring mother image, whereas A. K. Ramanujan’s poem “Of Mothers Among Other Things” is a blissful rendition of a mother who is happily engaged in domestic chores throughout the day. However both these cultural *personas* portrayed by Anita Nair do not strictly conform to the conventional and stereotypical self-sacrificing mother image that is usually espoused in art and literature as intrinsic to the core of Indian and world culture. Instead they are authentic images of women and their symbiotic relation with modern society and depict real-life situations.

“The House is Waiting” is a woeful narrative of a lonely woman writer in an old and empty dilapidated house wondering what it would have been like to have a family of her own. The graphic details picturing the condition of the house are actually metaphors signifying the genuine emotions of the old woman who was probably abandoned by her relatives and completely forgotten and alienated by society. Her sad situation is pertinently highlighted by references to ‘the mottled red tiles’, ‘the sagging wooden beams’, ‘the cold floor’, ‘the brown crumbly stone’, ‘the ancient trees’, ‘the black hardened tar’, ‘the drying hay’, ‘the rotting leaves on the ground’, ‘the tapestries of filmy cobwebs’ and ‘the silent and motionless’ house with ‘Eyes closed / as if it wishes to see no more,/ know no more’ (MM 52-53). Another poem, “The Face Mask” satirises a rather mundane but common obsession ascribed to women everywhere in the world- an interesting global cultural phenomenon passed on by women from generation to generation- the craze for preserving and maintaining beauty at any cost.

With sandal and turmeric dust

Yogurt gone a drippy sour

And a few drops of rose-watered hope

I fashion for myself

a splendid new face for this new me.

With this mask I will

Exfoliate the past speckled with yellow

‘maybes’

Seep withing and gather the debris of

rejection

Smoothen weary pathways

And cleanse all devastating faint

praise. (MM 65)

This poem is narrated by maybe an ex-film actress who is striving to “exfoliate the past”, “smoothen weary pathways” and “cleanse all traces of devastating faint praise”. Her predicament is similar to the earlier old woman in the lonely house. The woman wearing the face mask also appears to be struggling with distressing matters like alienation and loneliness, familiar issues which can be considered as visible cultural manifestations of contemporary society. Another poem which portrays a similar theme is “Sunshine - The Colony Cat” in which the portrayal of the cat may be interpreted as the personification of a lonely lady *persona*.

There is nothing about her

That suggests

A ball of fire

Or a heap of living coals.

Tawny warmth

Or the radiance of self-containment.

.....

Somewhere in her is a mew

That has yet to find its voice.

When the skies drizzle

Shooting stars

She searches for it with us. (MM 92-93)

The cat becomes a signifier, of a smart woman who had been literally “A ball of fire” in the very sense of the phrase during her youth, but whose existence has now been reduced to the “A register of comings and goings/ Waiting for the door to open/ And a lonesome being to come her way” (MM 92).

These narrative woman *personas* epitomise a shocking component of modern Indian family culture, neglect and disdain for the aged, when juxtaposed with the age-old tradition of the Indian joint family system wherein each member of the family was obliged and duty bound to take care of every other member irrespective of age and gender. It is a common sight nowadays to see old people, especially women, being heartlessly discarded on the streets and left to fend for themselves, by their own offspring. Single women, even if they are educated and employed are still considered a stigma by their own siblings and even in the society at large.

There is a poem which resonates Kamala Das' nostalgic poem, "My Grandmother's House", in which Das relates the fond memories spent in her ancestral *tharavad* (family home). Nair's poem titled "The Last Rites", portrays an estranged granddaughter sharing the depressing memories of her grandmother's last days curbed within the "whitescapes" of a hospital. She muses pensively about how her grandmother must have suffered as she spent those appalling final moments lying on the hospital bed.

Whitescapes

Ceilings, walls, starched cotton sheets,

crisp uniforms.

You lie there

Staring into the whiteness beyond this

white

Wistfully.

Tubes meander, this way and that, in and

Out,

Breathing life, pumping blood,

Feeding sustenance, draining rivulets of

flesh. (MM 73)

This poem gives the stark image of a modern multi-speciality hospital, which is quite a common sight nowadays. Hospitals were once regarded as holistic cultural centres devoted to healing and transforming human lives. These centres that had once catered to dedicated services of the weak and sick people in society have recently been distorted into cultural landscapes of callous, consumerism. The granddaughter expresses her futile wish to be able to take her grandmother far away from the "whitescapes" and back to the peace and serenity of the home where like before the grandmother could:

Lean back in the green armchair

Where you liked to sit spooning wisdom

Into my reluctant throat. (MM 74)

The following verses further illustrate how the granddaughter yearned desperately to rescue her grandmother from her current state of "borrowed" life:

Let me cloak you with rainbows

And tiny mirrors that let loose a galaxy

of stars.

Let me brush your hair into a million

waves.

There you are, as you used to be, no tubes,

No distress, no borrowed life. (MM 74)

“Why Women Dream?” is the realistic poetic narrative of an employed woman who dreams of a better future with the savings from her hard-earned wages. The poem throws light on various cultural issues prevalent even in contemporary society such as gender inequality and sexual harassment faced by most women in work places and on the streets. The woman working as a telephone operator in a real estate office with “ballooning hopes”, faces “faceless” humiliation daily during her “sandwich-like” journeys in buses and is forced to;

Suffer in silence,

the shame of it,

for being treated like a fair

piece of flesh. (MM 31)

The author laments how even modern women undergo various kinds of oppression and atrocities in domestic spheres, job places, public spaces and especially while travelling in public transportation. The narrative *persona* subtly points out that the ‘cultural gaze’ of most men even in the modern age, irrespective of how educated they are and where they come from, has remained unchanged over the years. At the end of the poem the woman stops dreaming and accepts the harsh realities of her life as “The wings of Pegasus ail and shrivel” (MM 33).

A majority of poems portraying the narrative woman *persona* deal with favourite universal themes dealing with love, lust, longing and loss. Poems such as “Free Fall”, “I Want”, “What is This?”, “Hello Lust”, “You said. I agreed”, “A Brief Respite”, “Co-dependent”, “Love for a Cat Man” offer blatant representations of bold, unconventional women falling in love, indulging in extramarital affairs, and most often facing rejection and failure. But it is heartening to note that the entire category of lover-women *persona* does not end up simply moping around. They ultimately cope with the depression and make practical decisions to move on and live their lives, determined to succeed whatever it takes, as illustrated delightfully in the very short poem titled “An Ostrich’s Love Song”:

Fight your own battles.

If you win, I’ll rejoice

With you in your triumph and glory.

If you lose,

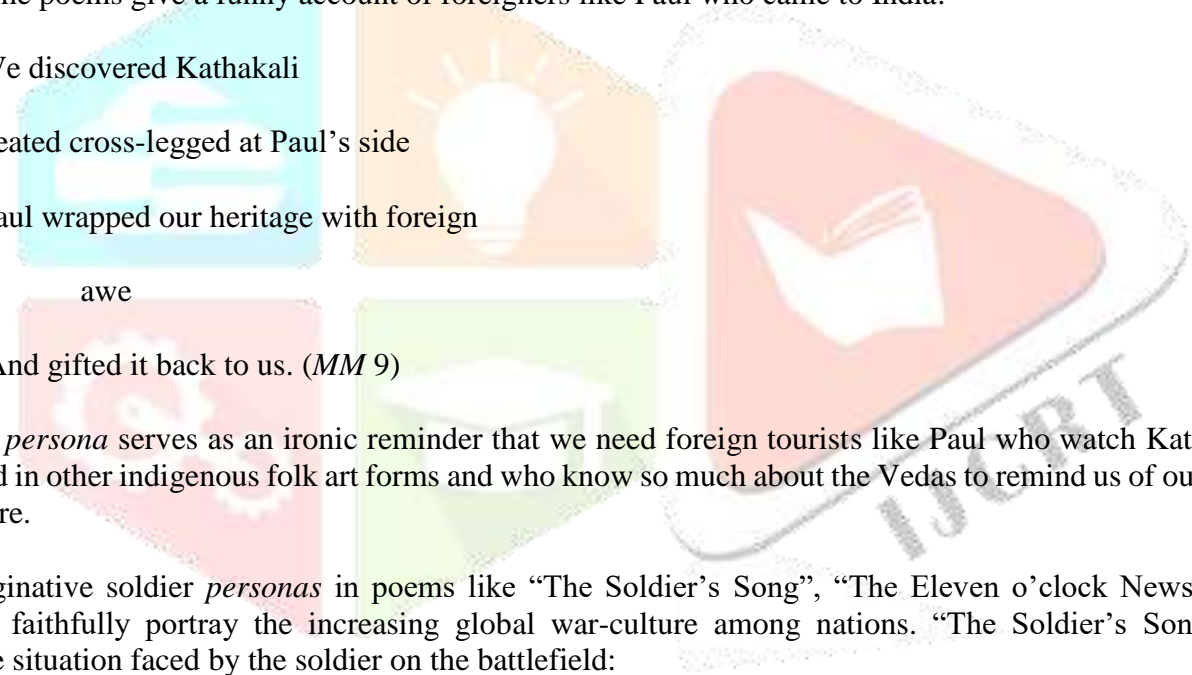
You have the solace,

Of hiding your head between two pillows. (MM 70)

The second *persona* of *Malabar Mind* manifested in multiple facets is placed in specific but complex spaces, either fictitious or real. This *persona* is the more imaginative *persona* as indicated by the title of the anthology, *Malabar Mind*. Malabar was the name of a region in northern Kerala, a name that is connected to the state’s past history. It no longer exists today like the erstwhile provinces Venad or Travancore in Southern Kerala. These places which were once real

cannot be located today anywhere on the map of Kerala or India. Yet, the Malayali psyche prefers to use and retain such place names. Innumerable instances can be found, as in naming a train, the Venad Express, a hotel or resort as Travancore Heritage and cuisine as ethnic Malabar cooking. This tendency in naming may be viewed as a conscious effort to preserve some sort of a cultural clinging to a glorious past. Anita Nair mentions in the footnote to the poem “Malabar Mind”: “Though Malabar has no geographical boundaries, no presence on a map of India, it still exists as a state of mind” (MM 25). The imaginative cultural *personas* in *Malabar Mind* consist mainly of the geographical landscape and psychological mindscape of Kerala, the foreign tourist named Paul, the soldier(s), the immigrants Patel and the Cosmopolitan Crow and the pilgrim/devotee. Most of the poems are set in the cultural landscape of Kerala which is symbolically suggested by various cultural markers. In the poem “Malabar Mind”, a ghost-like imaginative persona flits between Kerala in the past and the present. The poem is a journey in the Malabar Mail from Madras symbolic of the journey from the past to the present. As the train crosses over the river Nila, the imaginative persona points out the banks of the Nila river. It is the most ideal geographical marker of Kerala culture, the site where once flourished “triangular hate” during the colonial era, among “the cow worshippers, the pig haters and the sunshine-haired cow eaters” (MM 21). The poet ensures that the ‘green-ness’ of Kerala is enhanced throughout the poem by continually referring to coconut palms, emerald caves, green mansions and pools.

The imaginative *persona* puts on the guise of a foreigner, a Czech named Paul in the poems, “Vulcan in Brindavan” and “Vulcan in Love”. At home, Paul “had sold his soul to the cannibal world of advertising”, referring to the diehard commitment to his job and the work culture abroad. In India, Paul seeks solace in the “old heaven of Ayurveda/ Iron bhasma, stuffed mussels and tantric/ sex” which are though cultural markers, rather stereotypical images of India (MM 11-12). The poems give a funny account of foreigners like Paul who came to India:



We discovered Kathakali
 Seated cross-legged at Paul’s side
 Paul wrapped our heritage with foreign
 awe
 And gifted it back to us. (MM 9)

The Paul *persona* serves as an ironic reminder that we need foreign tourists like Paul who watch Kathakali, who are engrossed in other indigenous folk art forms and who know so much about the Vedas to remind us of our great tradition and culture.

The imaginative soldier *personas* in poems like “The Soldier’s Song”, “The Eleven o’clock News” and “Twenty Fellows” faithfully portray the increasing global war-culture among nations. “The Soldier’s Song”, depicts the gruesome situation faced by the soldier on the battlefield:

I walk the kkaki hills
 I hide in deep furrows of land
 I write letters to my family
 I tell them all is well.
 I drink my tea
 I polish my rifle
 I try not to think
 I block out fear for it cripples.

When I spot an intruder
 I do not look him in the eye
 I shoot to kill.
 One bullet for one enemy soldier.
 That is what I'm taught
 This is how I fight. (MM 84)

The above verses reveal how an individual when he becomes a soldier is transformed to the homeogenous identity of a mindless fighter trained only to shoot to kill. The impending hazards of war culture and the catastrophe the world is heading for is veiled in the lines;

Men die; martyrs are born
 But the war must go on (MM 86)

Human beings have no care and concern for humanity or compassion in the modern world. The macabre situation of the soldiers whose "valour drenches their smiles" is evoked in the lines given below:

Phones ring with sepulchral tones
 Telegrams are weighed down with death.

 Our men have frost bitten toes
 Feel a dull white fear ravage their bones. (MM 86)

And;

Twenty Fellows huddled here
 With stolen time from everyday lives (MM 88)

From native and local *personas* Nair moves on to a Mr Patel in "Happenings on the London Underground". This poem is a brilliant exposé of diasporic culture replete with its "recycled nostalgia" and his culpable queries:

Did I do right by leaving home?
 Did I sin by crossing the seas? (MM 27)

A classic example of immigrant cultural consciousness is also reiterated in the last poem of the collection, "The Cosmopolitan Crow". This satirical poem portrays the existential angst of a contemporary urban Indian crow that leaves its roots and migrates to "find himself in the US of A" (MM 103). Instead the crow finds itself lonely and suffering from culture shock as it cannot comprehend the crows-turned-ravens' caws with an American twang (MM 103-104). Arundhathi Subramaniam reviews *Malabar Mind* in *Kavya Bharati* and comments that the poetry collection is a welter of geographical and psychological landscapes (www.cse.iitk.ac.in). This is very true in the depiction of the imaginative immigrant *persona*.

The psychological mindscapes of the cultural *personas* are explored further in three poems "Mostly a Man. Sometimes a God", "May You Sleep a Million Years, Shiva" and "Words Will Never Cease to Sing". The first poem illuminates

the spiritual culture of modern individuals who still rely on superstitious beliefs and man-Gods. In the first poem mentioned above the imaginative *persona* assumes the form of a devotee enthralled by the fiery chants of Muthappan, “the lord of the jungle, son of the tortured vines” (*MM* 3). The second poem in the trio portrays a *persona* who was formerly an ardent devotee of Shiva. She proclaims that she will not worship Shiva anymore thereby defying the ancestral cultural traditions and leaves the temple with a parting curse: “May you live trapped in your slumber/ No bells shall ever ring for you. (*MM* 7). The pilgrim *persona* in the third poem is an interesting psychological case. This *persona* represents the modern individual who goes on an annual pilgrimage not to a religious shrine but to the hospital–shrine. The modern pilgrims harassed by physical and mental lifestyle diseases wearily climb the hospital stairs to find solutions for “forbidden trespasses and foolish indulgences” (*MM* 80). The imaginative *personas* in *Malabar Mind* are ‘states of mind’ of multiple *avatars*- individuals, travellers, migrants, pilgrims, devotees and also assume the form of lands, cultures and traditions.

Michelle Reale a librarian devoted to the study and research of South Asian literature and poetry comments that the poems reveal Nair’s talent for constructing poetry which is accessible without being simple and complex without being obscure while simultaneously possessing an aura of both the mysterious and the mundane (www.sawnet.org). The blurb on the back cover clarifies that in these poems the real and corporeal, landscapes and mindscapes are explored with a rare fluid ease. Nair rakes through the everyday, from the quirky resonance of Malabar names to the stressed drone of the television newscasters during war time; from the apathy of non-stick frying pans to the quiet content of cows chewing mud. Kala Krishnan Ramesh feels that it is impossible to get away from Anita Nair’s poems, evoking as they do states of mind that readers can recognise immediately. Ramesh’s article “Raking up the everyday” published in The Hindu Literary Review, mentions: “As Anita’s words – the nuts and bolts of verse- come tumbling out, pouring all over the page, spilling into the reader’s mind, the effect is like walking between thousands of rolling marbles in a room whose walls are closing in on you” (www.thehindu.com). The poems display an intense sense of rootedness, be it ancient or contemporary, and almost every facet of human existence that can be related to the modern cultural persona has been covered. The varied cultural milieu is well illustrated in all the poems.

According to Kala Ramesh, the poet labours at the work of crafting verse to construct a bridge strong and beautiful that takes the reader from the personal images of the poet to the truth of what these images stand for, and, to the reader’s own everyday truths (www.thehindu.com). The multiple cultural *personas* in *Malabar Mind* are metaphoric images fashioned from the myriad *personas* residing in the world which we inhabit, imitate and imagine. The narrative and imaginative *personas* do not convey any cultural conflict; on the other hand they echo the quintessential ethos of a hybrid and fluid glocal culture. The fragmentary and ephemeral nature of contemporary existence is illuminated by multiple facets of varied states of mind of the cultural *personas* as Anita Nair’s lines elucidate:

...all that happened was a state of mind
best forgotten and tossed aside. (*MM* 45)

(Abbreviation used *Malabar Mind*- *MM*)

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